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petite



maggie butt

Hearing Eye

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For my family
with love and gratitude

*Be brief, for it is with words as with sunbeams,
the more they are condensed, the deeper they burn.*

Robert Southey, (Poet Laureate 1813-1843)

Contents

Luck	7
Self-portrait in Blue Room	8
I am as Happy	9
My 'Second Life'	10
Mushrooms	11
Ant Life	12
Crane Driver	13
Lourdes	14
Belgium	15
Hindu Temple, Neasden	16
Night Times	17
Afterthought	18
Brighton	19
First Contact	20
Pigalle	21
Threads	22
Up From The Blue	23
Changes	24
Tethering The Moon	25
Again	26
The Shape of It	27
A Theft	28

Travelling Fair	29
Lucky Bag	30
Talisman	31
Reception Class	32
What Would I Give?	33
Never Was	34
Heart Break	35
I Never Wanted This	36
Ashes	37
Address Book	38
Tattooist	39
Acer	40
The Music of Front Doors	41
Trash TV	42
First of January, 4 am	43
List	44
Condensation on a Bedroom Window	45
Mining	46
Slug Wars	47
This Moment	48
What is Reason?	49
Horoscope	50



Luck

Do you believe in luck?
That second's tick, rice-paper thin
which steps your step in step
with one who will be all in all to you;
that shimmer in the air which separates
you from the crashing car, the flying glass,
the straying bullet, crumpled metal,
blood and pain; the sigh of prayer
which wafts the virus past your head
and off into the night?

Self-portrait in Blue Room (Perranporth)

Part room, part sky, high in a house
just anchored to the world, straining
like a kite tugging at its string;
the curve of ceiling, curve of roof,
lifting off into a cobalt sky; a lark-wing
room to ride the summer thermals,
soar and swoop in cornflower light
reflected from sea to wedgwood walls;
and the days ahead in a mermaid room
for growing gills and never surfacing
to breathe; and me in the room, spun out
from the world in the blue of the light
and the seagull cries and the bark
of a dog and the crisp of the air;
free-wheeling down a country hill,
feet off the pedals, wild into the wind.

I am as Happy

as a man whose house, juddered
in a landslide, comes to rest

just where he'd always hoped to live
overlooking the sweep of bay.

Stepping up the path and opening
his front door, he finds vibration

has loosed a bag of diamonds
hidden in the rafters, which now lie

winking at him, all over the floor.

My 'Second Life'

No desks and screens for me: but tanned
a biscuit brown, eyes creased from staring
out to sea; my dreadlocked hair bleached
straw by salt and sun; a wet-suit skin tight
as a seal's; body of muscle and hope.

My second self won't care about the cold shock
of the sea as long as surf is up: I'll breast
the breaking waves, buffeted and drenched,
cough water, coming up for more,
feet numb, ready for the moment and the rush.

And in the evening, salt-lipped, sand-caked,
sit by firelight, watch the sparks soar star-wards,
listen to the songs and poems of the world,
all searching for the perfect word,
the perfect wave, to carry us ashore.

[illegible]

11

Ant Life

Scurrying in and out of readings,
lugging our self-important words
like leaf-clippings half our own size;
busying ourselves with so-and-so's review,
award, obituary. Coming and going,
going and coming, weaving through grass
stalks as if they were forest giants
gazing up at the jackbooted humans
and higher, to the birds, longing to fly.

Crane Driver

Inhale and start the steady climb of morning
mirroring the sun into the sky.

Up there he's lone as lighthouse keeper, cosmonaut,
glass-coffined in wide silence, cloud-companion.

High as a god on Olympus, far from men, intimate
only with the wind, which speaks buffets and blows.

And yet a lever-flick gears up connection with the world
the one great arm swings out, the pulleys winch, and shift

ton-loads with clockmaker precision; concentration
steels the flabby corners of the mind. He is the fulcrum,

balance point between ton-weights and arabesque:
still centre which must hold.

Each dusk the slow retreat, back to the solid ground,
the pub. Resume the buzz of hive.

Lourdes

We are voyeur-tourists, greedy for miracles:
sniffing round the edge of pain; smirking
as nun in boiled-sweet mac raises her mobile

to photograph the statue of the Virgin; pointing
at coach-loads filling gallon cans with holy water;
a thousand candles, guttering for profit.

Until in mass-raised voices I smell prayer,
the tang of it sharp on the tongue, sweat of it
naked in the air, and shocked by recognition

(it tastes of love, and so of course it fells
you to your knees) I see, weaving amongst
the crowd, hope steals on rainbow feet.

Belgium

When the land is flat, the eye turns in
to homely warmth, fresh-swept interiors,

long winter evenings brewing beers
which shape the rolling landscapes of the mind,

melted chocolate poured and formed to creamy
mountains of luxury on the tongue.

Hindu Temple, Neasden.

Carved white marble. Silence. Peace.
These languages I speak.

Cross-legged and reverent, palm
to palm in hope, I understand.

No need to translate into words
which skim like stones across a pond

or sing as hymns which weave
like Morning Glory, wild among the rafters.

Night Times

3 am in the Sheltered Housing

Worry stalks the hallways
whispering through letterboxes,
rattling windows, and one by one
the lights come on as old bones
shift to quell his voice, with tea,
with books, with crossword puzzles;
battening down the hatches, sealing
up the cracks, forcing him out.

4 am in the Maternity Ward

All the new babies, tired with protest
at this hot / cold, bright / dark
hungry / thirsty world, one by one
stop their angry / lonely wailing
fall asleep, back into themselves.

Afterthought

I realise, later,
that you saw my pyjamas
drying on the airer
and feel a threshold
of intimacy
has been crossed.

Brighton

Great skeins of starlings loop around the pier
lassooing evening's light over the tide
sweeping a figure of eight through sunset's
rose and silver, ice-dancers gliding
on the vivid air above the fairy-lights.

Parents swoop around the student halls
gathering their chicks, weaving them back
into the fabric of the family, taking them
home to roost like starlings on the pier.

First Contact

I man the galley, rapt in radio waves,
while heaps of chairs become the mother-ship
carrying the chosen over vast-space distances.

New to this world, still wreathed in galaxies,
briefed imperfectly about our ways
they dress in tutus, top hats, giant high-heeled shoes,

take registers: check off the unseen with the seen,
glimpse through nebulae of generations,
speak to the invisible, name their names,

know with utter sureness this small room
is centre of the universe, which all the stars
rotate around in perfect order.

Pigalle

This Rue is where my daughter plans to live:
a tattoo artist yells across the street
where old drunks sun their leathered chests and give
her leering looks; the teenage whores entreat
each passing tourist; dealers thrive like weeds;
a corner bar boasts cross-dress cabaret;
the scent of urine rises; heat forms beads
of sweat – a spring Parisian bouquet.

But strangers clink their glasses in the park
and she will climb five flights of champagne night
where rooftops of Montmartre after dark
gleam with reflected gold and ruby light,
throw wide the shutters, sip the air's rich wine,
intoxicated, think, "All this is mine."

Threads

These threads between us
still vibrate, taut as the strings
of violins, thrum messages,
like country phone wires, hot
with love, where flocks of birds
perch on a frosty winter dawn.

Up from the Blue

The life-rocking gale subsides,
silk-rippled calm invites you in.
I watch from the beach, shading my eyes
against the glare, against the fear
that our worst moments strike
when we are blithely unaware,
shooting up from the blue
like a shark beneath a snorkeller.

Changes

Beached on the world,
my curved belly resting
on the unfamiliar graininess
of sand, rocked by the
shush and wush of waves.

Nobody to throw water
on me, urge me back
into the ocean. I have
to turn myself, to learn
again the many ways to swim.

Tethering the Moon

Suppose we were to hear the moon declare
that she could slip the shoes of gravity
as simply as the way you wave goodbye?

Would we not turn the minds of our best
engineers to throw a net around the moon
and tether thick steel cables to our oldest

rocks – cooled lava from our very core –
even though she might strain at the leash
and threaten to tear us out of orbit with her,

wouldn't that be better than the prospect
of staring up at night to a dark sky
without that old lop-sided smile?

Again

Come closer now and let's return,
pay again on this fairground ride
strapped in by swaggering lad;
feel the lift, the rush, the wind,
loud music crashing the heart,
candyfloss and hot-dog smells,
the whirl, the lights, the screams;
never mind the nausea
the stomach-churning drops
sometimes bumps and bruises,
run round to join the queue
feet kicking up the turf, stand
in line ready to do it all again.

The Shape of It

two
at first
entwined
then billowing
out, sails brimmed
with wind, belly with
movement, house with noise
and muddle, hours crammed
with loud and rush and full,
until doors start to close
peace settles and
I see that it will
narrow down
at last to
just we
two

A Theft

Surely it was only yesterday –
close as a handbag on my shoulder
tucked below my arm, its reassuring bulk.
But when I feel for it I find it's gone,
a pickpocket has cut the straps,
swift as thieves on a Sicilian Vespa.
And when I'm questioned at the form-fill
desk, (the badges, fans, intolerable
length of afternoon,) I find that it was
daysweeksmonthsyears since I last
snapped the clasp and rummaged round
inside. Its shape dissolves. A face mists
in the mirror which I barely recognise.

Travelling Fair

The shock of the impossible. It folds!
That strident, swirling, screaming metal
folds like obedient fabric, fitting lorry
like a foot within a shoe. A carousel,
a chair-o-plane, ghost train, tunnel
of love, each neatly telescoped
on to the back of gaily painted truck.
So memory folds and wraps the past,
its long and lovely pocketed moments.

Lucky Bag

A bag of guilt and lies
among the dolly-mixtures
– testing of our wills.

Sent to the shops for two,
I opened both on the way home
to bag the better toy.

First lie (perhaps) as glib
as peppermint, a multi-layered
gobstopper, on a violet breath.

Talisman

I furled my fist around mum's morning kiss
guarding its heat as I slunk into school
the one defence to shield me from Miss Crowe,
Old Crow, her name as cruel as her spite,
her night-wings spread and talons sharp as fear,
eyes brilliant with rage. She hated every child.

My fist clenched tight as ache all day
through tricky toilet-times and cutlery
and skipping, not to let the charm escape.
A year of her, five days each drawn-out week
and no spell but a kiss to thwart the witch,
protect, enfold and make invisible.

My palm, remembering the warmth of lips,
asks where such amulets can now be found.

Reception Class

The troublesome nature of buttons
and laces; of treasures which should
or should not be tasted on the tongue
– a mouse-dropping or currant;
this whole new cathedral of words
with echoing resonances
forbidden cloisters, perfumed altars,
impossible as doing the right thing.

What Would I Give

to hear again, beyond my leaden limbs,
their voices calling from the wakeful world,
the sounds which wash like closing waters – skim
above my head, my body's foetal furl,
my eyelids' weight – and lap me far adrift
in dreams? So snugly-warm and unaware
it would be cruel spite to make me lift
my head, to shake and haul myself upstairs.

Then I imagine, one more time, I feel
the strength of arms which gather me aloft,
still more asleep than not, safe in the steal
and rhythm of their steps, until the soft
of pillowed kiss. However long I live,
to feel that one more time, what would I give?

Never Was

My never-brothers crowd me sometimes,
jostle, tweak my hair, pretend
to trip me up. Older, teasing,
take my books, my dolls, toss them
to each other far above my head.
Or sometimes, gentler, help
with schoolwork, bring home
handsome friends, teach me
how to drive. But they are
never-was and not-to-be,
my mourned, miscarried brothers
stepped aside for me.

Heart Break

Sometimes the break of heart is not like glass.
It silts like rivers, shifting great ports far inland
maroons the quays of Ostia and Rye, depletes
their granaries, slower than candle-burn,
shape-shifts the landscape, hills the river-bed
dries up the fisheries. Sand trickles through
the neck of hourglass, filling lungs
and throat until it stops the tongue.
But note the start, the hairline fracture
dating to that time, this hour; first grains
of sand which start to dam the tide.

I Never Wanted This

For Tim

I wanted to run away to sea
climb rigging, sing shanties, dance
hornpipes, swab the deck and raise
my eyes to the horizon, blue
disappearing into blue – gripped
only by simple, fleshly fears: pirates,
swords and cannon-balls; the swelling
ocean storms which whip the words
out of your mouth; falling from crow's nest;
sharks circling lazily, patient for blood;
the ever-present possibility of drifting off
the edges of the world...

Ashes

He was a Cambridge professor,
a man who stood before thought
as a reader before a bookcase
gravely selecting the right volume.

Now thoughts are wisps of smoke
ashen as the library at Alexandria.
Today he gropes along the shelf
and can't remember what a book is for.

Address Book

Here names hide in the leaves
like scorpions, ambush you unawares
in the middle of the morning. Names
which scorch, their voices silent.
And what to do? Ink out?
Obliterate? The violence of night.
A truth too far.

Tippex would cover them as graves
in snow, a bump of scar tissue
reminding of the wound it hides.
A simple cross then, furred white sails
of evening, beyond which the name
remains, glimpsed as through a gate
which opens to another time, another world.

Tattooist

I choose the ripples of your living flesh –
my paintings breathe, sweat, shimmer, soak the sun
not trapped in gloomy halls, or fixed on plaster
in the cold apse of a church. Oh yes, they'd last,
but not know anything of love: that certainty
of names within a heart; the scar which shows
where love once was (the name erased, though memory
still breathes); the only choice when boys go off to war,
(no call for death's heads, anchors, lips and roses then)
he creeps in, sheepish, says the one word, *Mum*.
I give him that. From skin to skin he takes her
to his grave, as she goes down with him.

Acer

For just two days the acer flames
as if it's in a spotlight on a stage.

Liquid fire shoots up the stem
sings out in the bright leaves,

lit from within, a fibre-optic lamp
wine-red as a vamp's fingernails.

Then overnight it drops its leaves
after one final incandescent hour,

embracing death in glorious clothes
blazing like a firework in the dark.

The Music of Front Doors

While most are mute, I've lived with others which would sing
a letterbox lament in low blue notes whenever wind
came round into the east. Just so when you have gone:
a harmony of woes, this deep vibration in the keening bones.

Trash TV

Let's play loud music, dance until we drop,
make technicolour love, and flop
in front of trash TV, let's go and shop,
or drink until the room's a spinning top,
until we find a way to make the real world stop.

First of January, 4 am

The dry cough of a fox shocks us awake
announces this new year. The country comes
to town and something old as fear pads through
suburban streets with rasping, strangulated
cry. It hunts its mate. We lie and wait
for answering bark between the bands
of drunken revellers. Hear the old year
turn tail and slope off into the dark.

List

Just a sec, I know they're here somewhere,
if you'd stop rushing me I'd find them.
Perhaps I might have packed them in a case,
or wrapped brown paper, tied with string.
They might be in the loft or shed, or, ah! look now –
my crumpled list of Great Good Things to spend
a life upon. And so they must be here...
Under the bed? Or slipped between the pages of a book,
the minutes of a day? Re-check the list. Oh dear.
No ticks. I lost the list and have been busy with
I don't know what. But there's still time. Give me
the list, I'll start today. What do you mean?
Right now? No time to get my coat?

...

Condensation on a Bedroom Window

The invisible made plain:

warm

breath

of sleeping

lovers

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Mining

Today the London planes
which green our terraced lives
have had their annual hair-cut,
pollarded to within an inch of their lives –
chainsaws, swearing, shriek of grinder,
and nothing for the weekend.
Forest giants, scaled down for suburbia,
now domesticated, neat, respectable.

But plane tree roots run wild
beneath the ground, anarchic,
escaping in all directions,
like the mole-man in Hackney
who's burrowed out a warren
miles below North London,
house tethered by guy-ropes
straining like a hot-air balloon;
demented collier, searching for no ore
but the rich prize of undermining
expectations, shaking the foundations.

Slug Wars

Leaving their silvery signatures
every night over the bread-board,
ghost-slime, delicate calligraphy
messages from the hereafter.
Ectoplasm, faery bunting
festoons the taps and gas rings
the morning after the party.

Cooler than secret agents
neither shaken nor stirred
they outwit deadly salt rings
set to fizz their insides-out
side-sliding death to vanish before dawn
like vampires to dank coffins.

Intangible as spirits
except on rare ambush nights
when we surprise them:
plump middle-aged lovers
caught *in flagrante* by moonlight.

This Moment

Sunlight through leaves throws dappled shadows on the wall;
the telephone sighs to rest in its cradle, shifts to get comfortable;
fish defrosts on the work-top, drips pensively onto the plate;
the cat turns, skirts an unseen obstacle, starts to wash its ears;
I call a rushed good-bye while thinking of something else:
the un-hung washing, un-paid bill, un-lived dream,
headlights which raked the ceiling of my childhood room.

What is Reason?

What is reason?
A roof of tile and steel.

What is reason?
A manuscript in Greek.

What is reason?
A key without a lock.

What is reason?
A rime of frost on grass.

What is reason?
The moon about to wax.

What is reason?
A table of the tides.

What is reason?
Words stolen by the wind.

Horoscope

If I gave credence to that aerial stuff
I'd blame a misalignment in the stars,
embattled planets which can't get enough
of strife – old stories: Venus spurning Mars,

old gods still rolling dice, still flashing sparks
of lightning, to split my grounded life
from branch to root, to blacken with dark
stains of severance, more sudden than a knife.

I half imagine bad things come in threes
and fate is ruled by 'houses' in the sky,
but strive to hear the voice which still believes
that I can change my future if I try.

I'll banish night, defy the horoscope
and watch the morning star align with hope.



Maggie Butt's first full collection of poems, *Lipstick*, was published to critical acclaim in 2007. She is an ex journalist and BBC television producer, and currently head of the Media department of Middlesex University. She lives in London.

Poetry:

Quintana Roo (Acumen Publishing) 2003

Lipstick (Greenwich Exchange) 2007

I Am The Sphinx (Snakeskin e-book and recording) 2009

Essays:

Story – The Heart of the Matter (Greenwich Exchange) 2007

Reviews for *Lipstick*:

"powerful writing ... sharp insight here as well as moving, lyrical writing." Dilys Wood, Second Light Newsletter.

"If these poems were wrapped around fish I'd peel them off and save them." Envoi.

"sympathetic, skilful – and surprising. " Alison Brackenbury.

"A gift for empathy, a talent for fresh expression, a distinctive voice, vigour of expression and gift for metaphor." William Oxley.

"*Lipstick* is a good deed in a naughty world, shining out with a desperate courage... a book held together by love." John Freeman.